

## **The Psychodynamics of the Client-Consultant Relationship**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper reveals the lack of discovery of the unwritten or unspoken expectations of clients in a client-consultant relationship. Successful management of these expectations on the part of the consultant could lead to fruitful outcomes for both clients and consultants. In addition, consultants who are adept at managing these expectations could gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive profession. This paper reviews both academic and practitioner literature in relation to factors that are seen as significantly affecting consulting assignment outcomes for both client and consultant. It also highlights the dearth of research on investigation of the interplay, connectedness, and relationship among the various factors identified in isolation in the existing literature. In addressing this gap, the author proposes a conceptual framework with a broad research agenda with research questions to establish the linkages among the significant success factors identified in the literature. This paper makes a valuable contribution toward future research in this respect by providing a clear conceptual framework and robust research agenda.

**Keywords:** management consulting, psychological expectations, technical competence, professional contribution, personal style

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The underlying proposition that drives this conceptual paper is that management consultants who meet the implicit expectations of their clients are more likely to secure further engagements and referrals than those who merely meet the technical requirements of consulting assignments. The implicit expectations are those that are not explicitly written into a contract or orally expressed by the client before the start of the consulting assignment. The author undertook an extensive literature review of articles (from databases such as Academic Research Premier, Emerald, Blackwell, Business Source Premier, and others) in an attempt to understand key skills for consultants and came to the conclusion that there is a dearth of research in the area of psychological expectations of clients. Hence, this paper is intended to spark interest and add to the body of knowledge in the area of psychodynamics of client-consultant relationships by setting out a research agenda.

Client expectations have been categorized into three levels for the purpose of this paper: technical competence, professional contribution, and personal style. The aim of this paper is to review the unspoken expectations of clients assuming that technical competence is a prerequisite and does not provide the differentiating factors that will ensure engagement with the client. Although these expectations will vary depending on the individual traits and beliefs of each client, this paper will cover many important areas for consideration.

Many management consultants are now performing outsourced IT and administrative, commercial, financial, or other activities for and on behalf of their clients (Kubr, 2002). The workplace seems to have changed significantly over the last two decades, as more and more jobs have switched from a 'traditional' to a more 'contingent' category (Parks et al., 1998). Contingent workers are diverse and include consultants, independent contractors, temporary workers, part-time workers, seasonal workers, volunteers, subcontracted workers, and leased workers (Polivka and Nardone, 1989).

This paper focuses on self-employed consultants only and therefore does not cover consultants who work as employees for consulting firms. The reason for excluding the latter type of consultants is that they are not included in the definition of contingent workers. In general, contingent workers such as self-employed consultants do not have either an explicit or an implicit expectation that employment will be continuous or on-going, even assuming that there is satisfactory performance by the consultant (Zeytinoglu and Norris, 1995).

Consultants employed by consulting firms will normally be reassigned to other client projects upon completion of an assigned client project.

At this point, it is appropriate to ask whether client organizations require consultants as contingent workers to deliver on psychological contracts that are similar to those expected of employees. Martin, Horne, and Chan (2001) affirm that there are unspoken expectations in the client-consultant relationship and define these as the unwritten and unofficial contracts that focus on different expectations of clients and consultants. Their work, however, does not identify the specific unwritten expectations; rather, it concentrates on meeting general perceived gaps in expectations of both client and consultants.

Recently, researchers (e.g., Chelliah and Davis, 2007) have commenced exploring psychological contracts in consulting relationships, borrowing its application in human resource management (Hiltrop, 1996) in the case of employees. Chelliah and Davis (2007) believe that outsourced consultants do have an expectation of securing on-going assignments from clients, and, in this respect, they have similarities to employees (who expect on-going employment).

This paper aims, through a literature review, to identify clients' unspoken expectations in relation to consulting assignments. A conceptual framework is also put forth to clarify the relevant constructs, together with a set of propositions that could guide field research in this specific area.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Clark and Salaman (1996) define management consulting as an advisory activity that necessitates intervention in an ongoing system where the advisers are external specialists and so have no organizational responsibility, and where the aim of the activity is some alignment to the organizational system.

The definition implies that consultants have the technical expertise necessary as a prerequisite to the starting point in a client-consultant relationship. Often, there is a perception that the technical skills of a consultant are the most important factor in determining consultant selection by clients (Czerniawska, 2002). This perception is reinforced by leading management consulting firms through their recruitment method because they rely on the case-study interview as a tool for selecting consultants (Armbruster and Schmolze, 1999, cited in Armbruster, 2004). This finding is based on a job interview in which an abbreviated form of a Harvard Business School case study is posed to candidates.

Is technical competency of the consultant the most important factor in securing new business and referrals from existing clients? Bergholz (1999) states that sound technical performance is easily undercut by failure to meet expectations in two key areas; namely, professional contribution and personal style. He defines professional contribution as an expectation that is layered on top of technical competence. This view is based on the client's unspoken expectation that the consultant will contribute some extras, such as carrying out engagement of the executive's personal agenda, giving supplementary advice without extra charge, and transferring some competencies to the client's staff.

Personal style is a set of unspoken client expectations, defined by Bergholz (1999) as relating to the consultant's ability to fit in appropriately by reading the environment of the client, being enjoyable to spend time with, and, when required, listening to and empathizing with the client while providing some counsel without charging additional fees. In a similar vein, Appelbaum (2004) through his literature review lists a number of factors that influence the client-consultant relationship which, apart from technical competence, include an adaptation to client readiness, an investment upfront in learning the clients' environment, and a real partnership with consultants.

## **2.1. Professional Contribution**

The career health of the client (specifically, the engaging executive) needs to be maintained throughout the consultation process. In order to achieve this, the consultant must manage perceptions to protect the interests of the client. 'Agenda pushers' can be damaging to themselves as consultants, as well as to the client. Clients do not want to hear how they could not have done it without the help of the consultant. Sheth and Sobe (2000) reinforce this notion, stating that consultants often focus on what they want and need rather than on the client's agenda. They further promote the stance that, when walking into a meeting, there must be a focus on the client's needs, and how this will eventually achieve their own personal objectives.

The client (engaging executive) will be motivated by success and self-elevation within the workplace (Romaniuk and Snart, 2000). The consultant must realize that the client expects a high level of personal gain from their relationship. Judge, Erez, and Bono (1998) state that self-efficacy can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of greater success in new endeavors. The consultant should be aware of the client's self-efficacy, which includes the client's judgments of their

capabilities to handle events and deal successfully with challenges. Therefore, the successful consultant must allocate the correct level of resources necessary to attain the client's personal goal as well as those related to the project itself.

Bergholz (1999) believes that clients expect to be coached sensitively without losing their status as an employer or having their authority challenged. To facilitate this need, the consultant must apply assertive persuasion. Kubr (2002) explains that this method uses the forces of logical argument to persuade other people that what you want them to do is the correct or most effective action to take. Hoar (2005) implies that persuasion is a vital skill – more subtle than the art of negotiation, less detectable than delegation, and close to Machiavellian manipulation. Conversely, Czerniawska (2005) says that clients want leadership from consultants, but they also want consultants to stand up and be accountable for the results of their ideas. In order to be coached effectively, there needs to be open communication and no restriction of information, which is seen as 'ugly' by the client.

A high level of trust is needed to be able to collect all the pieces that will eventually affect the quality of the project. In May's (2004) opinion, one cannot design trust nor demand it from others anymore than one can declare himself or herself trustworthy. May (2004) adds that three elements need to be present in building trust; namely, the consultant should display consistency, competence, and caring.

Bergholz (1999) refers to the consultant as a 'hired gun' with a mission to eliminate employees on the client's hit list. This assignment should be approached with caution and the need for balanced judgment. Sheth and Sobe (2000) advise consultants to be wary of being used by clients to confirm premeditated solutions. There may be underlying factors that affect the performance of the individual, and blindly accepting orders will not enhance the consultant's integrity and professional reputation.

Sheth and Sobe (2000) further recommend that consultants make an effort to identify thinkers who can challenge the client's thinking. These thinkers may include other levels of management within the client's firm who have a clearer view of prevalent issues or are removed enough for greater clarity. Consultants should be encouraged to speak honestly, without feeling vulnerable, and believe that there will be rewards for speaking openly. Clients do not generally look outside the organization for people to agree with them, but rather search for new ideas and perspectives and someone who will inspire and stimulate discussion.

Furedi (2005) puts forward the argument that many managers who are afraid to make decisions hire high-priced consultants to reaffirm the obvious and indicates that it is generally safer to adopt someone else's best practice than to engineer one's own.

The consultant must be able to work effectively within different cultural spheres and act accordingly. Bohm (2003) insists that the fact that consultants enter organizations ostensibly to solve problems does not mean they are immune from the insecurities and apprehensions that afflict managers in client organizations. Apart from cultural factors, the type of industry can be highly influential in the type of information and input required from the consultant. Further, Bohm (2003) is of the opinion that highly regulated industries may require the consultant to reinforce the client's ideas rather than show entrepreneurial flair. To produce a report for a local authority that will gain approval may require clever wording and a procedural approach rather than left-field ideas or artistic ability. According to Bohm (2003), the public sector, which is subject to high levels of scrutiny, is becoming more reliant on consultants.

Goh (2002) believes that, although creating knowledge is an important activity, knowledge has to be harnessed and leveraged in order to be useful. Dong-Gil (2005), however, goes further in asserting that client firms expect consultants to transfer their implementation knowledge to their employees so that they can contribute to successful implementations and learn to maintain the systems independent of the consultant. Bergholz (1999) states that imparting this created knowledge will result in competency-transfer. However, Dawson (2000) argues that knowledge sharing does not necessarily result in competency transfer because, when knowledge is transferred, it changes. He believes that the change is due to the intrinsic nature of knowledge; therefore, one person's understanding, appreciation, and grasp of knowledge will always differ from another person's.

Menon and Pfeffer (2003) highlight the fact that managers in organizations often cohere in closely knit in-groups and come to see the knowledge that insiders possess as superior to knowledge that lies outside the walls of their organizations. On the other hand, information transfer should be open and without reserve on behalf of the consultant to build the internal knowledge base and confidence of the client and their employees. The client believes that these services were paid for and the experience gained should be used independently. Kubr (2002) defines knowledge sharing as an attitude and a skill, and many

consultants require guidance and encouragement to be more effective at it. Consultants should not fear that, by doing an exceptional job, they have given away their most productive asset (i.e., their knowledge).

Chelliah and Davis (2010), in their recent research of management consultants, found that clients expect consultants to 'run the extra mile.' Typically, this finding covered situations where the client expected the consultant do extra work (usually arising from out-of-scope creep) without charging any extra fee. This client expectation is interesting because it provides a link to good citizenship behavior. Employee contributions to an organization can range from the minimal possible to maintain membership in the organization to going the extra mile by voluntarily engaging in extra-role behaviors that benefit the organization. These extra-role behaviors, which go beyond the requirements of job descriptions, are called *organizational citizenship behaviors* or OCB (Turnipseed and Rassuli, 2005; Hui et al., 2001). Chelliah and Davis found that consultants run the extra mile for three main reasons:

- to secure additional future work from the client;
- to gain a competitive advantage over other consultants in future projects; and
- to achieve self-satisfaction as an indicator of a job well done.

## **2.2. Personal Style**

With regard to professional contribution, it was previously assumed that technical competency is a prerequisite, and that this is the minimum entry level. In much the same way, when personal style is the defining factor, it reflects that the candidates are equally rated with regard to technical competency and professional contribution. Bergholz (1999) states that client hygiene factors are satisfied at this level of competency. He believes that satisfying the technical competency and professional contribution needs elevates the consultant to a powerful position among competitors. After that, personal style will be the point of difference, giving the consultant a competitive edge over the competition.

Hirschhorn and Barrett (1993) describe personality as self-systems that are motivating forces concentrating on the maintenance of interpersonal security and the avoidance of anxiety. They state that self-systems are learned defensive activities against anxiety caused by the loss of security or self-esteem. This factor brings into play a new motivator behind personality types that may not seem evident, but should be a consideration during personal interaction. These

anxieties are heightened during high-pressure situations and may be reflected in the personality of the client differently depending on the levels of stress encountered (Hirschhorn and Barrett, 1993:221).

This is where personal style factors can shore up the relationship. Bohm (2003) states that outcomes reflect the social characteristics of the people involved, producing a value relationship between the client and consultant. May (2004) disagrees, however, stating that the consultant needs to be neither liked or agreed with, but only trusted, in order to break into the inner circle.

Maru and Prince (1999) believe that 'liking' between people is a complex dynamic, but that some of those dynamics can be uncovered and purposefully developed using skills such as listening, trust creation, and conversation building with philosophical agreement. There needs to be an awareness of subtleties in behavior and an ability to react appropriately. Kolb et al. (1984) state that cues are often direct. That is, through words, gestures, and facial expressions, cues are transmitted from the perceiver (interpreter) directly to the perceived communicator. Some cues are more clear-cut than others are and can be gained through external sources as well-trained or in-built perceptions. Kihn (2005) states that consultants are not hired as experts, but they can never appear to be anything less than expert-like. The critical part of that term is 'like.' Kihn (2005) adds that it is an act, a charade, a delightful *pas de deux*, but that it is essential. It is therefore fair to expect that both the client and consultant will be role playing to some extent and utilizing certain techniques to gain acceptance and 'be liked.'

Bergholz (1999) states that consultants are expected to bring a broad view of the business environment to an organization and to share this view outside the boundaries of the assignment. Joni (2005) states that it is of vital importance to have well-placed and well-prepared outsiders in a leader's inner circle and calls them 'third opinion advisors.' He believes that most consultants act as 'second opinion advisors' and offer opinions based on their expertise and experience in their known field. However, for a consultant to endear himself/herself to a client, a higher level of respect and trust is imperative.

Some authors (Chelliah, Nikolova, and Davis, 2009; Joni, 2005) emphasize the need for consultants to build three levels of trust (personal, expertise, and structural) with the client in order to provide the right balance of second and third opinions. Joni (2005) believes that very few consultants make it to the level once known as 'court courtier' – a close and trusted attaché to an influential 'prince.' Building on this firm personal affiliation, the third-opinion advisory role may



expand into the role of thinking partner. It is at this point that the relationship deepens, and, in order for it to flourish, the consultant and client need to find a way to set aside the second-opinion relationship. This new level in the affiliation can be seen to either jeopardize the existing relationship or take it to a higher platform. The advisor needs to be many things, including a sparring partner and sounding board, and must be prepared to get into the trenches. It is about being passionate about success and attaining real enjoyment and fulfilment from it (Joni, 2005). Once the advisor is held in this esteem, there is potential for enormous two-way learning and exponential growth of the consultant's personal capabilities and knowledge. Desouza, Awaza, and Jasimuddin (2005) stress that having an inventory of external sources of knowledge is important and that consultants must listen, recognize, identify, and capture that knowledge.

Inkpen and Tsang (2005) state that membership in a network and the enduring exchange of relationships that result creates the potential for knowledge acquisition by network members. The greater the number of inner circles that can be explored, the more that will be learned from clients and the more they will be able, in turn, to teach other clients. Eventually, a network of thinking partners will form, and can be called upon when the need arises. Dolezalek (2004) states that CEOs who are getting good advice from a wide range of perspectives will probably do better than those who hear only from others who think the way they do. The more inquiring and intelligent the person, the more likely he or she will want to engage in discussion and create a healthy level of conflict.

In summary, the literature review covered the following key areas:

#### PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTION

- Maintaining perceptions, self-esteem, and status of the client
- Ability to coach through assertive persuasion
- The need for balanced decisions
- Knowledge transfer
- Organizational citizenship

#### PERSONAL STYLE

- The reliance on embedded personality to engage clients versus the effectiveness of learned behaviors in achieving the same outcome
- Social acceptance – the importance of liking or being liked

- Trust that allows the consultant to enter the inner circle and achieve close-confidant status

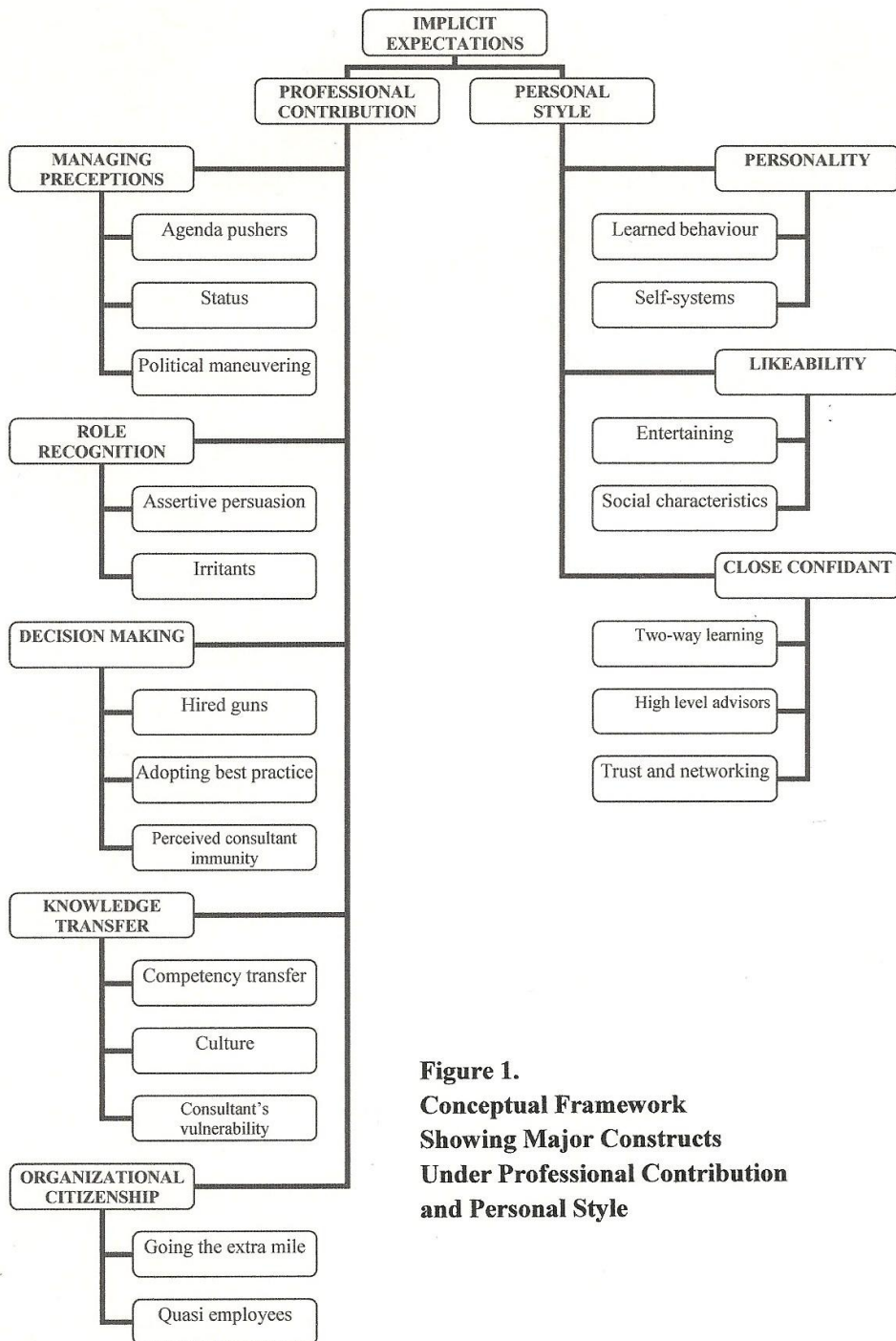
### **3. DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The review of existing practitioner literature and academic research provides an overview of those factors that are most often indicated as critical success factors in the client-consultant relationship. Despite the many contributions of these studies, however, there is a lack of structure and clarity in the discussion of the factors. Often, a number of factors are stated without any discussion about their interrelations and exact impact on project outcomes. For example, the issue of personality has been singled out as critical by several authors, but there is not a unified understanding of how personality influences the client-consultant relationship. Another critical issue is the lack of clarity with regard to the connections among technical knowledge, experience, and problem solving. Are they independent of one another, or interconnected? In addition, how do these factors influence the outcome of consulting projects? Do they also contribute to the development of trust in the client-consultant relationship as they indicate the consultant's credibility? This paper develops a conceptual framework to explore these questions.

The literature review identifies the major factors at play under the constructs of professional contribution and personal style (shown in Figure 1).

A research agenda can be constructed using a number of research questions based on the above framework. All these questions (refer to sample questionnaire in Appendix) explore the linkages between the various factors in each construct. These are:

1. What is the importance placed on managing the perceptions and status of the client in relation to the outcome of the project itself?
2. What are the difficulties in managing power and control when coaching a client and how does a consultant sensitively assert opinions?
3. In what situations is it more advantageous to agree with the client's judgments and when is it better to challenge them?
4. What is the perceived residual value of knowledge transfer and does it necessarily result in competency transfer?
5. What is the client's expectation with regard to the organizational citizenship qualities portrayed by the consultant?

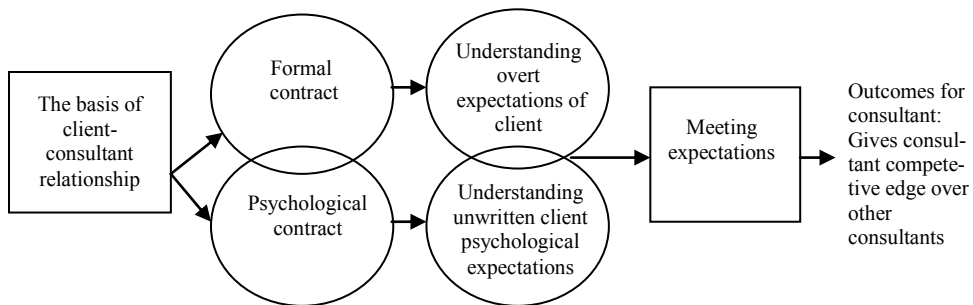


**Figure 1.**  
**Conceptual Framework**  
**Showing Major Constructs**  
**Under Professional Contribution**  
**and Personal Style**

6. Are embedded personality traits the key factor in engaging a client or are there learned behaviors that are equally effective?
7. How important is it to be liked, get enjoyment out of a professional relationship, and have a socially fulfilling association?
8. Where do engaging executives (clients) gain their most valuable information and when should the consultant become a close confidant rather than a specialist advisor?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper provides a research agenda with plausible lines of inquiry based on a robust conceptual framework. It lays the foundation for future research into identifying the relationship among the various significant factors identified in the consulting literature as isolated factors. For the first time, an attempt has been made to establish the interplay between these factors by deciphering the clues given in the extant literature. It now is possible to investigate these factors and their correlation through research using the research questions listed above. But most important, a new model of client satisfaction emerges (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. A Holistic Model for Achieving Client Success**

The new model in this paper encompasses the formal contractual requirements as well as the psychological contract (meeting psychological expectations) as the holistic way of satisfying client's needs, which will lead eventually to the consultant's being favoured by the client in completing in future assignments.

## APPENDIX

### Sample Questionnaire

*Please read the statements below and indicate your level of agreement with them by ticking the appropriate box.*

#### PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTION

	<i>Agree Strongly</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree Strongly</i>
<b>MANAGING PERCEPTIONS</b>					
1. Consultants often lose their way and push their own agendas rather than that of the client.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. The status of the consultant is important to add credibility to the results.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Consultants use political maneuvers to influence the right people within an organization.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ROLE RECOGNITION</b>					
4. Fear of challenging the client's authority restricts the effectiveness of the consultant.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
5. Consultants should recognize the client's pet irritants and adjust their approach accordingly.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
6. The consultant must have trust in the client before he or she can truly act in a trustworthy manner.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>YES-MAN OR BALANCED DECISION-MAKER</b>					
7. Consultants are often engaged to confirm what the client already believes.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
8. It is generally safer for a consultant to adopt best practice than to engineer his or her own practices.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
9. It is better to use consultants on sensitive projects as they are immune from insecurities and apprehension that affect employees.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>EXPECTATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER</b>					
10. It is the consultant's responsibility to ensure that knowledge transfer results in competency transfer.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
11. Though consultants can be effective, there is a greater amount of knowledge within your organization than without.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
12. Once a consultant has completed the assignment, I expect to be able to continue development independently of the consultant.	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOR</b>					
13. Do you expect the consultant to go the extra mile and beyond the specified requirements?	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
14. Are the consultants expected to be quasi-employees and portray company values and ethos?	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>

**Sample Questionnaire (Continued)****PERSONAL STYLE**

	<i>Agree Strongly</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree Strongly</i>
<b>PERSONALITY</b>					
15. Personal style has far more to do with embedded personality rather than learned behavior.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
16. Consultants need to alter their behavior to fit with a diverse client base.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
17. Consultants adopt defensive strategies to avoid loss of self-esteem or their sense of security.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
<b>THE IMPORTANCE OF LIKING OR BEING LIKED</b>					
18. Consultants need to create an environment and atmosphere conducive to meaningful interaction.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
19. Does the consultant add more value to the project when he/she is socially accepted rather than not?	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
20. Through words and body language, consultants appear to be expert-like even if they are not.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
<b>CLOSE CONFIDANTS</b>					
21. The consultant needs a network of external people to be successful in business.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
22. With a high level of trust and respect, consultants can be seen as close confidants and give advice on higher strategic issues that far exceed initial brief.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□
23. Consultants recognize and have an appreciation of the two-way learning they acquire by assisting the client's organization.	5□	4□	3□	2□	1□

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